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October 19, 2015

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I have always been a person that subscribes to the philosophical school of existentialist thinking. Most importantly in my belief is the belief of free will—that people are free and able to make their own decisions based on what they see fit. A lot of people argue that an individual’s life is a preset, predetermined path of events until death—but I do not believe in this. While events out of an individual’s control can have an effect on a person’s future (i.e. a tragic accident), it is the decisions a person makes based around these events that exemplify the concept of free will.

I believe a lot in what Danish philosopher Soren Kierkegaard has said in his writings. The “father of existentialism”, he believed in that a person has the own control of their life, as watched over by a higher power (God). Another key component of existentialism is the theory that “existence precedes essence”, meaning that an individual is independent and responsible for their own actions and conscious, while essence is made up of the labels, roles, stereotypes, definitions, and preconceived notions that are used to define a person. What is defined as the “essence” is less important in defining an individual than the fact that they are an actual individual with a conscious.

The theory of existentialism applies to the education system in that a student is responsible for his or her own development—not the system or other factors of essence. The student has to utilize their own free will in order to succeed, by attending classes, doing assignments, seeking out extra help when needed, and be motivated to learn. However, it can be said that students in a poor environment are not given the same educational opportunities of a child living in suburban middle-class America.

A lot of Kierkegaard’s philosophy is rooted in a Christian belief system—but Jean Paul-Sartre is an atheist who also helped in the development of existentialism. Sartre believed that humans are “condemned to be free”, since he believed that there is no higher power—and thus, no essence. In addition, Sartre argued that the concepts of individuality need to be “earned and not learned”, meaning that a person has to strive for individuality. In the case of the education system, this means that a person needs to strive for success as a student. Should a student be unwilling to try to succeed, they will be unable to define themselves as an individual and be shaped more by their essence.